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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD IMMEDIATE 1813
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 0149
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT IMMEDIATE 0158
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY IMMEDIATE 0078
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE IMMEDIATE
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT IMMEDIATE 0163
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK IMMEDIATE 0045
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA IMMEDIATE 0907
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001472

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT RELAXES BAN ON INDOOR POLITICS

REF: DHAKA 1418

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In an address to the nation on September 9, Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed announced a raft of decisions, including a relaxation of the ban on indoor politics, a deadline for the compilation of a list of corrupt suspects, and a pardon for thousands of people accused of involvement in the August riots. Fakhruddin Ahmed also stated that the Caretaker Government would even try to hold elections earlier than December 2008, "if possible." Representatives from all major parties expressed support for relaxing the ban on indoor politics. With the ban eased, the Election Commission is scheduled to begin its dialogue with the parties this week. Fakhruddin's address closely reflects comments made to the CDA a.i. by Chief of Army Staff General Moeen U Ahmed. (Reftel) END SUMMARY.

INDOOR POLITICS BAN RELAXED

¶2. (U) In a televised speech to the nation September 9, Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed announced that the government would relax state of emergency restrictions on indoor politics as of September 10. In taking this action, Ahmed said the caretaker government hoped to create a "congenial atmosphere" for holding a dialogue with the political parties on electoral reform.

¶3. (SBU) The government has relaxed, but not lifted, the ban. According to the government's gazette notification to the Home Ministry, parties may hold meetings only to discuss organizational reforms and the Election Commission's electoral reform proposals. Parties can conduct these meetings at their central offices, other public venues, or members' residences, but must inform the police in advance. If the meeting will consist of more than 50 people, Home Ministry approval is required.

ELECTIONS POSSIBLY BEFORE DECEMBER 2008

¶4. (U) The Chief Advisor also said the government was committed to handing over power to an elected parliament as soon as elections could be held, "if possible ahead of the December 2008 deadline....As soon as the new voter's list with photographs is completed, the government will extend its full cooperation to the Election Commission to hold polls as

quickly as possible." (NOTE: CDA a.i.'s September 9 meeting with the Chief Election Commissioner to discuss election preparations will be reported septel.)

OTHER DECISIONS ANNOUNCED

15. (U) Fakhruddin said his government's objective is not only to hold a fair election, but also to build a "sustainable democracy" for Bangladesh. The primary means of doing this has been by trying to root out corruption. To this end, he announced that since the January 11 state of emergency was declared, over 8.2 billion taka (approximately USD 119 million) taken through corruption had been returned to the government's coffers. While insisting the anti-corruption drive must continue, Fakhruddin also stated that the government would not be publishing further lists of corruption suspects after September, and he emphasized the obligation of government agencies to follow the law in pursuing corruption suspects.

16. (SBU) Calling the recent rioting at Dhaka University an "sad incident," the Chief Advisor said four teachers and 14 students had been arrested and would be prosecuted in connection with the riots. "The people tolerated this kind of destructive activities in the past, but now they won't," he said. However, he also announced that no one else would be charged in connection with the incidents and that thousands with charges pending against them would be pardoned.

17. (U) The Chief Advisor announced several other measures aimed at improving the standard of living of normal people. These include: a consumer rights act which awaits final

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approval from the government; an increase in government assistance to repair infrastructure damage caused by this year's floods; further measures to control prices, particularly as the inflation-prone Ramadan period approaches; and efforts to rehabilitate and relocate hawkers whose businesses were affected by the government's eviction drive.

A RANGE OF REACTIONS

18. (SBU) Brigadier General ASM Hannan Shah, a close advisor to former BNP Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, was qualified in his support of speech, saying they would welcome the relaxation of the indoor politics ban "if it is unconditional" and said he has already issued instructions to BNP party offices throughout the country to reopen. Awami League reaction was positive. One Awami League representative said the lifting of the ban would enable it to begin meeting immediately to discuss its approach to reform. The announcement of the pardon of most of those involved in the Dhaka University unrest was met with almost uniform praise by the parties.

19. (C) COMMENT: In recent weeks the Election Commission had been publicly pressuring the Caretaker Government to ease the indoor politics ban. What was announced was a narrow relaxation, with numerous strings attached. Nevertheless, it indicates a government willingness to begin opening up. That, plus the other measures announced by Fakhruddin -- in particular, pardoning those involved in the riots and placing a deadline on the compilation of the list of corrupt suspects -- seem to have resulted in a much-needed public relations success for this government. The government also held a meeting with the business community on September 5 which was intended to repair bridges with the private sector (septel). Finally, Fakhruddin's announcement and its timing closely matches comments made to the CDA a.i. in her August meeting with Chief of Army Staff General Moeen U Ahmed (reftel). END COMMENT.

Pasi